TO SEE BETTER

Mark 10:46-52

September 8, 1985, 6:30 p.m.

John M. Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

What happened on June 25, 1876 in the Valley of the Little Big Horn depends on who is telling the story. A Wall Street Journal feature two weeks ago about General George Custer and the famous battle caught my attention. Custer, it seems, is enjoying renewed interest -- in his career, personality and, of course, his behavior on June 25. At the same time, however, the native American version of the story, while always differing profoundly, is now being heard and gaining new currency. Sitting Bull was there, as well, native Americans remind us. He was not the agressor, and it has been suggested that he too should have a monument. The facts, of course, are the facts. But the meaning of the incident -- what people saw who were there, if you will, and what people see today when they visit the site, examine the artifacts, depends very much on who those people are.

It was a revelation to me to learn that two distinguished scholars can look at the same event and see something entirely different. I had assumed that objective data produced objective conclusions. Notso. Something called the "historian's historicity" comes into play; a point of view, a position, a set of assumptions, a perspective from which the historian sees what he or she sees. The history of the North American continent does look different from the perspective of the native people who had been living on the land before the Europeans arrived. My high school text books talked about a rather heroic sequence of discovering, exploring, conquering, civilizing, settling. Much later I came to understand that the same events can be, and at times, are, more accurately described as invasion, aggression, robbery, exploitation, genocide. Whether it is a reservation or a concentration camp depends entirely on from which side of the fence you are seeing the world.

Two individuals often see the same object differently. I might see an all-out assault on the value structure of Western Civilization. In a rock concert, my son sees something else. When Jesse Jackson and Jerry Falwell look at South Africa they are not seeing the same thing.

There was a delightful sequence in the Steven Spielberg movie, E.T.... in which the children, having hidden E.T. in the closet are discussing what to do next.

> The older brother says, "Elliot, we've got to tell Mom."
>
> "We can't, Michael. She'll want to do the right thing. You know what that means don't you?" Elliot pointed at E.T. He'll end up as dog food."
>
> You're not going to tell, are you, Gertie? Not even Mom?"
>
> "Why not?" Gertie asks.
>
> "Because grown-ups can't see him. Only kids see him."

You will recall that the reviews and journals made much of the overt religious symbolism in that movie, and even its similarity to the life of Christ. I was more impressed with what I took to be the point -- an idea that at least suggests Jesus' statement that people who wish to see the Kingdom have to become like children, or at least correct their vision so that they can see like children see.

The text this evening is the account of Jesus restoring sight to a man who was blind. Sometimes we're not sure what to make of stories like this one, and are inclined to be distracted from the meaning of the story by the discussion of whether or not it really happened the way the Bible tells it. No one took pictures. Few of the people who were present when it happened were alive when Mark wrote it up several decades later. What we know is that the story was part of what the earliest Christian Church wanted to remember about Jesus. And beyond esoteric excursions into New Testament scholarship you and I are privileged to see the very great miracle of healing that happens every time sight is restored; instanteously or as a result of intricate, careful surgery in the hospital. In addition, there are just enough unpredictable cures throughout medical science to make even the most dogged empiricist nervous on occasion.

The point here and elsewhere, is that Jesus helps people to see. He is the New Testament, shouts the light of the world. He gives sight to the blind, clarity to the confused, light to those who live in darkness, and depth of vision -- comprehension -- to those who before have been seeing only the surface of things.

The context of this incident in Mark's Gospel, frankly, is the blindness of the disciples. On the way to Jerusalem, they still don't see what he is about. James and John ask for a favor. He asks what they want. They say "power, prestige, privilege..." "let us sit at your right and left hand when you get to be king." Here they are on the way to humiliation, self-emptying, crucifixion, still not seeing the point.

The blind man, Bartimaeus, was poor, a beggar, an outcast with no one to care for him. He too clamored for Jesus' attention. The crowd told him to be quiet, but he persisted. Jesus heard him and asked, as he had asked James and John, what he wanted. "My sight" the man replied. And he opened his eyes and saw Jesus. He saw -- he understood -- he followed.

But, first, there is a prior miracle happening in this text, one which we are inclined to miss. Jesus saw the man. Jesus demonstrated what it is to see clearly. Out of a noisy crowd of people Jesus saw the one man whose culture had made him invisible. He didn't count for anything. He was a beggar, an outcast, at least part of the people believed his blindness was punishment for his sins. The first miracle here is that Jesus saw him. That clarity of sight is not always a pleasant gift, by the way. It is still easy not to notice the outcast, the unwanted. Several decades after Michael Harrington wrote about our ability to live without seeing the poverty in our culture, we are still at it. How easy it is not to see those who make us uncomfortable, to live among the glittering lights and opulent commerce of an American city and simply not see those who will sleep under the benches or on the steps and in the corners of this church every night. "Am I my brother's keeper?" William Sloan Coffin asked recently, and answered "No. In Christ, I am my brother's brother." In the midst of serious proposals to balance budgets and eliminate deficits by reducing aid

to people in our system who don't make it, who -- like Bartimaeus -- are part of the invisible outcasts in the busy, prosperous crowd -- the chronically unemployed, the elderly, the handicapped, the hungry -- someone has to have the courage to insist that we see clearly: that we see the men and women and children involved. It is not a cheerful responsibility, but it is, I submit, a primary responsibility of the Church of Jesus Christ.

To see better...there is a sense in which there are always at least two ways to see -- superficially and profoundly: the surface glance, the passing view, and the deeper seeing a thing for what it really is. That's what art does, by the way: helps us to see the truth, the reality hidden in ordinary things. The late Howard Lowry, President of the College of Wooster, one time defined a liberal education as "the ability to see things as they are, not as they half are." ((College Talk, P124). That is always a miracle, a special gift. Suddenly, the grace and joyful goodness of a spouse, a lover, a friend, is clear and unmistakable and unbearably beautiful. Suddenly, watching them sleep -- or play -- or perform -- or laugh -- the miracle of your children -- flesh of your flesh, their brains and bodies and emotions and hopes -- stand out in newly vivid color and you see them clearly, and it is always a God-given miracle. Lowry cited Leo Tolstoy's complaint that we lose the capacity to notice -- to attend to the important things in life until the near thought of death brings us to the sense of them. "A pity", wrote Lowry. "It means missing so much now -- this side of the hospital corridor. So much of ardor, so much of joy, so much of beholding." (P128)

"Behold! Look!" -- The command is in the Bible hundreds of times. The Biblical writers want us to see everything -- the magnificent entirety of creation, from crawling insects to violent thunderstorms, and the equally astonishing versatility and magnificence of humanity, from the righteous rage of the prophet to the singular passion of the King to the tender love of the virgin. W. H. Auden wrote a peculiar hymn once with a line that goes: "Follow him through the land of unlikeness: you will see rare beastsand have unique adventures."

The Bible suggests that the most profound religious experience is not so much seeing the extraordinary as it is seeing clearly with the simplicity of a child; not so much being transported out of the world -- as the gift of sight to see the essence, the reality of the things and people of the world.

How blessed, how good -- for people who have grown tired of one another, husbands and wives whose ardor has waned and for whom the years have depleted any sense of joyful surprise -- to be able simply to see one another with fresh, uncluttered innocence and honesty. How good to be able to stand back and see our friends as they are -- charmingly and irritatingly different from us -- and offering their uniqueness, their wonderful gifts of kindness, companionship, love.

And how very good, on occasion, to know this Jesus simply with the uncluttered clarity of a blind person who can suddenly see. Bartimaeus opened his eyes and saw Jesus. How good to set aside, for a moment, our struggles with doubt, our fervent wrestling with probabilities and possibilities and to see, for one beautiful instant, the Lord so full of love that he notices a blind beggar lost in the crowd. How good if we could learn from Bartimaeus the lack of embarrassment, the innocent urgency to cry out "Lord have mercy -- my sight, my sight!"

How good to learn from this miracle to confess our blindness and simply, quietly, to ask Jesus Christ to help us see -- the world, one another and supremely -- him -- our Savior.

Malcolm Muggeridge, former editor of Punch, was a skeptic about Christianity much of his life. While working on a BBC documentary on Mother Teresa of Calcutta, he began to feel the pull of the Gospel. The result was his conversion and a lively faith with compelling power, literacy and wit. His description of the experience is remarkable:

> "Suddenly, almost with a click, like a film coming into sync, everything has meaning, everything is real: and the meaning, the reality shine out in every shape and sound and movement, in each and every manifestation of life, so that I want to cry out with the blind man to whom Jesus restored his sight: One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see. How, I ask, could I have missed it before? How could I have not understood that the silence, grey light across the water, the cry of the seagull and the sweep of their wings, everything on which my eyes rest is telling me of God?"
>
> (Jesus, The Man Who Lives, P25)

Jesus restored sight to a blind man one time. The miracle has been repeated time and time again in the lives of ordinary people with the strength to ask to see better. Without impediment, without condition, the gift of sight has been given. May it be so for us this evening as we gather at his table.

During a six week sojourn in a Trappist Monastery in 1979, Jesuit theologian Henri Nouwen composed a prayer every day. On March 11 he wrote a prayer which struck me when I read it this summer, as I began to think about our being together this evening at Christ's table, and as I began to ponder the text which will forever be a text with which we began this ministry together:

Let us borrow Henri Nouwen's words -- make his prayer yours.

Let us pray:

> "O Lord, grant me a pure heart so that I can see you and hear you in the splendor of the holy liturgy. How often do I sing the Psalms but remain deaf! How often do I see the bread and wine yet remain blind.
>
> "I really want to see...take me by the hand and lead me. Purify my heart and show me your light. I do not have to go far. You have given me the words to hear you and the bread and wine to taste you. Come, then, O Lord. I open my senses to your presence. Let me recognize you where you are. Amen."